

Avoid Costly Mistakes When Choosing a Software Development Partner

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Asking the right questions, at the right time, to the right people is a good recipe to follow when a choosing professional development partner.

Failing to make the right choice around your outsourced developer can lead to a bad experience – poor results, delays in delivery or a final cost

nowhere near the quote price. It can happen to anyone. It doesn't matter if you are inexperienced with custom software development or manage projects every day and are looking to augment the work of an onsite staff.

I used to be more than apprehensive about choosing the right partner until I organized a simple playbook to follow as I researched and interviewed developers. The process is really about just two sets of questions. The first set are questions you ask yourself and your organization to help you organize and prepare before you research and interview potential vendors. The second set are questions you ask about and to your prospective technology partner.

The starting point. What do you want to accomplish? Simply being able to communicate what you need the application to do isn't enough. To guide the process, you will need to be able to explain how the application fits into your business and why it's important to have. You will also need want figure out what other services or applications will have a dependency on the new application – and vice versa. What's not important is to worry about technology stacks – either for your legacy systems or your new application. Any software developer worth their weight will examine your current systems and recommend technologies that play well with them alongside the new application.

Is there a deadline? Another way of asking this- is there a compelling event that is driving the change or new application? What happens if the deadline is not met? Will business go on? Are there missed revenue implications, or worse, lost revenue implications?

What is the need for outsourcing after the software has been developed and deployed? Do you have the resources to maintain the software? Who will install patches and updates? Does the software need to be hosted or do you have the right datacenter and network resources?

How much am I willing to spend? This can be answered by asking even more questions.

Where does this project fit to improve the business? Is it mission-critical for the business to survive? Will it increase productivity and reduce labor costs? Will it help capture additional revenue that is now being missed? Software development is an investment. Figure this out and calculate the return on investment

based on your metrics (three years, five years, etc). This will help you develop a realistic budget. Don't forget any ongoing hosting or maintenance costs.

Next, how are you going to make sure the project is a success? While it's easy to say this is the responsibility of the developer – you are ultimately responsible to your stakeholders and customers that the project is successful.

Ask these questions. Do you have an internal team of stakeholders to help manage the project? Of course you do – but the real question is, can you get them to commit their time to the success of the project? Consider the interpersonal dynamics and culture of the team. Is there someone who would make a good lead- even if they are not the person who benefits the most from the new solution? What are their work schedules and when is the best time for them to meet as a group? Arbitrarily choosing time does not work. Sales managers – avoid pipeline days, end of the month/quarter. Finance people – avoid close and reconciliation days. It's important to know when the team can read updates, meet- undistracted and follow up from questions. Line up multi-time zones accordingly. How do your employees and teams collaborate with each other? Do they accept new tools, or do they fall back on what they are comfortable with?

Once you've asked, answered and organized all those questions it's time to research who you want to interview.

Website research is important but, keep in mind that a flashy website and great messaging is not real indicator of quality. In fact, when researching developers, it's more beneficial to use it as a tool to eliminate candidates.

Here's what to look out for:

Do they only seem to work with top brands? If they are doing work for Coca-Cola, Boeing or The Bank of America, it might be tough to get their attention on your project.

Do they have a US presence? There are some great advantages to a combination of a US based team plus offshore development. The right combination can shorten your project time by lengthening the workday that is spent on your project. Having little or no US presence will be a big challenge.

Do they have an inconvenient location? Even if there are multiple US locations listed on the website, keep in mind that at least during the initial work, there will be face to face meetings. Make sure the company can get to you within a few hours traveling time. This may have to be verified during the interview process.

Is your project or industry a focus of their website? Chances are that you are looking for something pretty specific and when you look at developers' websites you see a plethora of services. Take a closer look at what they seem to focus on. Look at their "what we do" or services page. Look at their industry focus page. Pay attention to what's on the top part of each page – what's on the left side? These are most likely the services, industries, etc. if what you are looking for is buried at the bottom or the far right- chances it's not something the company does every day.

Once you've narrowed the field, use their online contact form. How and how quickly they respond will give you some good insight to how they will engage. Do they respond within 24 hours? Do they respond directly to what you are requesting of them - or do they just send out a canned reply (don't count an automated response from the web form submission). Is the person responding looking to engage with you or just "feel you out"? Keep in mind, that it is a sales person's job to qualify you - so expect all the

typical questions- “do you have a current project?”, “do you have a timeframe?”, “do you have a budget”, and so on. This can be a bit frustrating, but a good company will have good people who can identify a serious buyer quickly.

Something to keep in mind during the buying process is that a worthwhile vendor will be looking to see if you are a good fit as much as you will be looking to see if they are the right vendor. You will need to be transparent and honest if you want to avoid a mismatch and the subsequent problems that go along with a bad choice. Remember all those questions you asked yourself at the beginning of this article? This is where they come into play.

You can tell a lot about the vendor by the questions they ask. If they are looking to solve your problem and deliver the best solution and deliver it on time with a smooth process, they will be asking questions about your business goals, your industry or market, your culture, your team, your legacy systems, your experience, etc. Beware of companies that want to focus on your budget and timeline. If they are telling you their pricing model on the first call – then walk away.

While the company should be able to provide you with clear answers to any question you deem necessary to ask, your objective is simple- you want to find out if they can do the work competently and will they be compatible with your organization. Therefore, you want to focus on a few areas around experience and how they work.

Even a start-up development company will most likely have its founder and one or two key members who have years of experience so it’s important to ask about the team that would be working on your project. Also, start-ups may have experience in development in other companies- but do they have a tried, true and repeatable process in place to keep their project on schedule? They may follow AGILE methodology for development- but if they haven’t practiced it as a team, it doesn’t help you.

How many clients do they have currently? Are they providing any of the clients with ongoing support and maintenance- including hosting? Ask whether they have any former clients and why they are no longer working with the company.

Do they have experience in your domain? If not, what industries have they worked in? While domain specific isn’t critical, having worked in multiple areas shows that they can learn and deliver.

Have they worked on integration projects? Even if you are not tying into legacy systems on your project- chances are integrating with something will come up.

Do they have experience with a variety of technologies and platforms or do they seemed to be focused on one or two?

What do they provide for maintenance, support and hosting services?

Can they provide you with a demo of their work- preferably something similar to your project?

Can they provide multiple references?

Will they be willing to take on a smaller project to start? An experienced company has the confidence that they out perform on the trial and be in a position to take on the larger, primary project.

Once you feel comfortable that the company can deliver. Then it’s time to see if they are the right match to work with. Remember this – your team and not you are the customer. It is super important to make sure your vendor will work well with the team to avoid problems in execution.

When you ask the vendor about how they would engage with your team, most likely you will hear about weekly, bi-weekly or monthly meetings. Ask if they can meet at the times that work best for your team (you asked that question earlier in the article).

Ask them about their collaboration tools and the method they will use (other than meetings) to communicate with your team. If you have a team that is not the most adaptable – ask the vendor if they will use your tools or communication methods. For success, it is important that the communication methodology fits into your company culture.

Will they provide access to their team lead during the selection process? It's very important that you provide the opportunity for your team to meet your technology partner's team before the engagement to see if there are any obvious compatibility issues.

Will they provide an onsite team- at least at the beginning of the project? Once the project is underway, it's perfectly fine that the two teams meet remotely but, getting the vendor's team onsite is a way to get all the stakeholders deeply involved right from the beginning – increasing the chances for success.

My playbook is pretty simple and adaptable to your business and your project. It's all about asking questions of yourself and your potential vendor. Let your questions guide you in selecting the right partner.

About the Author



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Prior to GreenDot, Chris was a founder and CEO at RapidPayCard, a leading ePayroll and employee payroll card program. Chris gained his experiences in successfully outsourcing software projects during the development of the RapidPayCard platform.